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Empowering migrant communities to prevent female genital mutilations in Italy

The experience of the AFTER project in Milan and Rome

act:onaid

Associate Partner



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Introduction:

Female Genital Mutilations (FGM/C) are a global phenomenon affecting 200 million women and girls worldwide, violating fundamental human rights. FGM/C represent a problem also for girls and women living in Europe. Although there is no evidence that they are practised in the EU, as well, it is acknowledged that the greater risk is when girls and young women come back to their country of origin on holiday.

AFTER (*Against FGM/C/C Through Empowerment and Rejection*) is a two-year project co-funded by the European Union aimed to prevent female genital mutilations through empowerment and awareness-raising activities targeting women and men from countries with a FGM/C/C tradition. The project was implemented in 5 EU countries: Belgium, Ireland, Italy, Spain and Sweden. In particular, AFTER included empowerment activities targeting women to raise their awareness on the consequences of FGM/C on their health, rights and sexuality, in order to prevent their daughters from being subject to this practice in the future. In parallel, the project included awareness-raising activities targeting the broader communities and specific paths for men.

During the project a series of meetings were started in 3 countries (Italy, Ireland and Spain), designing **women-only circles** (women's/girls' clubs) and **men-only circles** (men's forums), where women's rights and the impact of FGM/C on their life were discussed.

In **Milan** and **Rome** an initial mapping of the relevant actors and activities - associations, cooperatives, existing projects and active services targeting mainly women and migrants - was carried out for the realisation of the empowerment paths and the trainings, and preliminary and follow-up meetings were held to identify the most suitable local partners for the specific objectives of the activities. The local partners were key in contributing to the realisation of the empowerment paths and in reaching migrant women and men, being in close contact with the communities and having a profound knowledge of the local context; besides, they were essential to identify the women and men facilitators of the paths targeting women and men.

During the empowerment paths, participatory methodologies were used to encourage the raising of the issues, participation and participants' contribution to the debate, and to favour sharing within the group, as well as to enhance mutual trust. In particular, the project made use of the Reflection-Action¹ methodology, which ActionAid has been using for years in community empowerment and awareness-raising activities under its development programmes worldwide. The women and men facilitators, as well as the local partners, attended an initial 5-day training, realised with ActionAid women experts from Somaliland, Liberia and Kenya. The training and exchange course was aimed to transfer some useful tools for the women and men facilitators to deal with FGM/C during the empowerment paths and to clarify how and when to apply the Reflection-Action² methodology, which is effective for raising issues and collectively analyse them. Such methodology was combined with other tools the women and men facilitators had been already using in the participatory activities with the groups of migrant women and men.

¹ For further information about the Reflection-Action methodology: www.networkedtoolbox.com/pages/about-reflection-action

² Under the AFTER project, a toolkit about the Reflection-Action methodology was produced, aimed for the women and men facilitators of the empowerment and awareness-raising paths, available at the following link: www.afterwomen.eu/sites/default/files/media/Manual-on-the-R-A-revised-method_Toolkit.pdf



At the conclusion of the empowerment paths, women and men were involved in assessment sessions aimed to measure the change in participants' perception of FGM/C and to identify obstacles and possible strategies to put in place in future interventions to prevent FGM/C.

Beneficial to the empowerment paths was the organisation of informative meetings aimed to raise awareness in a wider public, in particular communities with a FGM/C/C tradition, but also politicians, teachers, professionals of the health sector - and not only, of the specific problem represented by FGM/C, but also of the different forms of gender-based violence that are faced daily by women worldwide and are crosscutting and present in every culture.

This report presents the results achieved and the challenges faced in the implementation of the empowerment paths and the informative meetings that took place in Italy, in particular in Milan and Rome. Given the complexity of this kind of approach to the issue, this report does not aim to be comprehensive of the experience of the AFTER project, but rather collects the main and most relevant insights to ensure an effective implementation of similar future interventions in Europe to prevent FGM/C though the central role of the communities at risk.

“Undergoing FGM/C is beneficial to social acceptance, as girls necessarily maintain their purity and virginity, date fewer men since they have a weaker sex drive, and thus have less problems in the society. Women with FGM/C can get about alone in the city streets without necessarily being accompanied by their husbands or brothers. FGM/C are being practised for social and aesthetical reasons. They are beliefs, customs, traditions that must be overcome.”

Woman involved in the empowerment paths

BOX: Examples of participatory tools used throughout the AFTER project

Body map: tool that facilitates the analysis of issues related to health, sexuality, as well as to rights and violence against women. It allows to think of and discuss the traditions that violate some parts of the body, such as FGM/C.

Activity mapping: tool that enables to describe oneself in the daily routine and lets the division of tasks between women and men emerge, thus leading towards an analysis of the relation between the social and the cultural construction of women's subordination.

River: it was effectively used to deal with some sensitive topics, such as the links among culture, tradition and health. The river represents the course of their life and gives them the chance to tell past episodes. Through this tool, for instance, one can talk of cultural traditions and their meaning (from the habit of chasing diseases away with a spoon of honey every morning, to burns on the body to recover from hepatitis, to female genital mutilations).

Photo-language: through the free choice of a photo, the participants have the chance to tell a fragment of their life; an episode of life lived; emotions aroused by a picture; personal reflections; memories. It is an excellent tool to “break the ice” in groups of people who do not know each other or who are not used to personal storytelling.



Fishbone diagram or Ishikawadiagram: it was used to define the concept of gender-based violence, without using pre-set definitions. Each woman has the task to define the concept of violence and the different forms it takes, positioning the post-its where she described different forms of violence she had experienced along each fishbone.

1. Empowerment paths targeting women and girls

ROME

In Rome, **Associazione e Casa delle Donne Lucha y Siesta**, a social reception and housing project providing information, orientation, counseling and shelter to women in need, was identified as a local partner. Lucha y Siesta is a Women's house, it is an anti-violence centre and a project of partial independence born from women's self-organisation, a place that has soon become a reference point in the city and works in synergy with social services, anti-violence centres, counseling services for social unease, women's associations and organisations, promoting autonomy rather than providing assistance. Today it is one of the most active components of the national movement *Non una di Meno*³.

The empowerment paths targeting women carried out in Rome and its province were 3 in total, realised from February 2017 to January 2018. All the paths were carried out in collaboration with the partner Lucha y Siesta, which contributed to identify the three contexts where the paths were realised: Centro SPRAR AIDA, Santa Croce in Gerusalemme squat and the shelters of the anti-trafficking project Roxanne.

Each path included the participation of 3 female facilitators, 1 female cultural-linguistic mediator, 1 ActionAid female coordinator for supervision and professionals (female lawyers, gynaecologists, anthropologists) with expertise about FGM/C.

³ The Italian platform *Non una di meno* is part of the international movement *Ni una meno* born in Argentina in 2015. *Non una di meno* in Italy gathers various feminist organisations fighting violence against women. For further information: <https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com>



Table 1. Women’s empowerment paths in Rome

| Path no. | Place | Number of meetings | Number of women involved | Age | Origin | Presence in Italy at the time of the path |
|----------|--|--------------------|--|--|---|---|
| Path 1 | SPRAR AIDA | 24 | 15 | 18-33 | Nigeria, Benin, Somalia, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Gambia, Bosnia | 3-6 months |
| Path 2 | Santa Croce in Gerusalemme squat | 12 | 18 (7 of whom from countries with a FGM/C/C tradition) | Extremely varied, between 22 and over 60 | Nigeria, Togo, Somalia, Eritrea, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldavia, Cape Verde. There was also a sporadic attendance of other women from: Bolivia; Polonia; Romania, Egypt, Tunisia, Ukraine, Ethiopia, England, Peru, Ecuador, Camerun, Italy | Over 5 years |
| Path 3 | Shelters of the anti-trafficking project Roxanne | 12 | 10 | 18-28 | Nigeria | Few months |

PATH 1:

It was carried out in the municipality of Colferro (Metropolitan City of Rome), at Centro SPRAR Aida⁴ and included 24 meetings (1 weekly meeting for an overall path duration of 6 months). The path was attended by 15 women (6 from Nigeria; 1 from Benin; 3 from Somalia, 2 from Ivory Coast, 1 from Senegal, 1 from Gambia, 1 from Bosnia). The age of the women participating ranged from 18 to 33. At the moment of the launch they all had been in Italy for a short time (about 3- 6 months).

⁴ Aida SPRAR is managed by Arci Nazionale. SPRAR projects are local projects activated on behalf of the Ministry of the Interior that provide shelter to people who were acknowledged a status of international protection: among them, political refugees and people fleeing from wars and civil conflicts. SPRAR projects guarantee beneficiaries a path of autonomy and integration on the territory, accompanying them for a short period (6 months extendable to one year) in learning Italian, accessing services, searching for a job. The AIDA SPRAR project has been active since 2009 in the municipality of Colferro. The women beneficiaries of the AIDA SPRAR project attend Italian classes, job orientation and training paths.



“I studied as a nurse and on the wedding night I cut it myself to avoid the pain of penetration” Woman from Somalia involved in the empowerment paths

A SPRAR centre was chosen as the context to kick-start the first path, as it was considered important and beneficial to the goals of the AFTER project to relate with young women who had been living on the Italian territory for a short period. The path focused on significant and essential issues such as women’s rights, health, harmful traditional practices to give up, the right to a satisfactory sexuality and the refusal of any form of violence on one’s own body and on girls’ bodies. Such issues represent in fact decisive and constructive points in a process of personal growth and are useful in the integration process that young foreign women face in the new migrant context.

PATH 2:

The path was realised at Santa Croce in Gerusalemme squat in Rome, which has been in place for about 4 years and is managed by Casa Action Diritti in Movimento. About 180 households live there coming from all over the world. This place was chosen as it was considered important to work and discuss also with women living in Italy for more years. Many among the participants share the same context - namely the squat - and the same “gender” problems. In order to respect the multiethnic coexistence, the participation to the path was opened also to women coming from countries without a FGM/C/C tradition.

“There are many problems with men, who always want to decide everything themselves”. Woman involved in the empowerment path

The path was attended by about 18 women coming from various countries: Nigeria, Togo, Somalia, Eritrea, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldavia and Cape Verde. Some meetings of the path were attended also by other women coming from other countries of the world: Bolivia, Polonia, Romania, Egypt, Tunisia, Ukraine, Ethiopia, England, Peru, Ecuador, Camerun, Italy. They are all women who have been living in Italy for more than 5 years, speak Italian well and have been living in the squat in Santa Croce in Gerusalemme street since October 2012. Their age varies: the youngest is 22, the oldest is over 60. They all have a family and children. Many have babies.

Designing the path inside a squat implied various difficulties: first, women’s participation was discontinuous, due to work and personal reasons. Moreover, the large presence of women from countries with a FGM/C/C tradition did not allow to face the FGM/C issue continuously. For such reason the path was shorter (12 meetings).

At the beginning, the FGM/C issue was dealt with only slightly as it caused embarrassment and fear. Only afterwards, once understood its risks, the perspective of the women involved changed, although some women considered to maintain the less invasive forms of FGM/C and did not express a total rejection of the practice.

Talking of other issues beyond FGM/C was useful since it offered the occasion to discuss issues related to other forms of violence against women, power relations between men and women, the right to health and citizenship rights. In some cases women showed little awareness of their own sexual and reproductive health and the meetings were an occasion to share information in this regard.



“I haven’t had a gynecological check-up for several years, sometimes I think it is not a part to be treated since it works autonomously”

Woman involved in the empowerment path

Path 3:

It was chosen to kick-start the third empowerment path with Nigerian women victims of trafficking hosted in the shelters managed by the Roxane project of the Municipality of Rome. The service offers prevention and counseling to all the subjects present on the street (women, men, transsexuals) and support and reintegration to the victims of trafficking.

The path was attended by about 10 women, all from Nigeria. They are young women who have been living in Italy for few months, who do not speak Italian well and live at the shelters located in the suburbs of Rome. They are all political refugees subtracted from exploitation and violence paths. They are aged between 18 and 28. This path, too, like the previous one, was shorter - 12 meetings.

Initially, the women showed some shyness and reticence to face the FGM/C issue. The most immediate answer the young women gave in this regard was they had never heard of it, or they had but as something far away, outdated, ancient. Just one Nigerian woman, ever since the first meetings declared that “FGM/C are a form of violence”. Many justify them as a tradition that has always existed. Some talked about the risks women face when they undergo mutilation and, above all, during the wedding night.

“Three are the pains a woman knows she will face in her life: circumcision, wedding night and delivery. Since you are a child, you have known you will have to go through these three pains.”

Woman involved in the empowerment paths

Some also share how the conception of the female body, the value assigned to pleasure and sex drive are slowly changing. A young Nigerian woman told: *“In my family, the female body has always had the unique function of delivering children. The vagina is conceived as “a gift the woman brings to the man”, that must be preserved closed and intact until the day of the wedding. I’ve just recently understood that the vagina also serves to experience pleasure and that the female body can also generate desire and pleasure”.*

MILAN

In **Milan** the local partners identified for the implementation of the paths were two:

- the **Crinali onlus social cooperative**, a multicultural cooperative that has been operating since 2002 and promotes psycho-physical health and life quality of migrant women and families, in the respect of cultural and gender differences. The Cooperative offers initiatives and services in



the health, psychological, social and education sector, carrying out activities of cultural-linguistic mediation, psychosocial support and psychotherapy, targeting migrant people, with particular attention to the motherhood and childhood sector. The Crinali cooperative has been working for years together with the Health and counselling centre for migrant women⁵ and their children of the AAST Santi Paolo e Carlo, guaranteeing cultural-linguistic mediation and psychological and social support services to foreign women benefiting from the service. The Health and counselling centre for migrant women and their children developed a long-standing experience in preventing and tackling FGM/C and in providing the women who underwent them with adequate care.

- Within CAIM (Coordination of the Islamic Associations of Monza, Milan and Brianza), we identified the association **Progetto AISHA**, a new and young local organisation that started to work on the advancement of women’s rights and on the fight against gender-based violence in Milan, facing the issue also within the Muslim community.

As of April 2017, five empowerment paths had been kick-started, which were concluded in November 2017. The Crinali cooperative, and in particular two mediators from Somalia and Nigeria, facilitated the meetings targeting girls and women from their respective countries. Progetto AISHA organized and implemented paths targeting mainly women and men from Egypt, instead, with the support of a female facilitator from Tunisia and a male facilitator from Egypt.

Table 2. The women’s empowerment paths in Milan

| Path no. | Place | Number of meetings | Number of women involved | Age | Origin | Presence in Italy at the time of the path |
|----------|---|--------------------|--------------------------|-------|--------------------------------|---|
| Path 1 | Muslim women’s house in Cologno Monzese | 14 + 1 focus group | 14 | 28-45 | Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Morocco | Most of the women have been living in Italy for many years, only a few have just arrived reaching their husbands. |
| Path 2 | Casa in movimento Cologno Monzese | 7 + 1 focus group | 10 | 21-38 | Mainly Egypt | Most of the women have just arrived in Italy. |
| Path 3 | Women’s house in Milan, or the park opposite Casa Suraya, a | 17 + 1 focus group | 14 | 21-36 | Somalia | In Italy for less than a year, all are asylum seekers. |

⁵ In 2016, the ASST (Local Health Agency) Santi Paolo e Carlo created the “Woman support centre” in Milan, thanks to the contribution of the Lombardy Region and the Department for Equal Opportunities. The Centre integrates the services related to the FGMs provided by the two health agencies in order to facilitate the access and to health services of women migrants with this kind of problems. The centre was born from the joint experience of the Health and counseling centres for women migrants and their children of the San Carlo Borromeo and San Paolo hospitals in Milan.



| | | | | | | |
|--------|---|--------------------|----|-------|---------|--|
| | reception centre where they are hosted. | | | | | |
| Path 4 | Women’s house in Milan | 24 + 1 focus group | 21 | 18-29 | Nigeria | In Italy for less than a year. Only a few have been in Italy for longer. |

PATH 1

The path had women from the Egyptian community as its main target, the largest community in Milan among those from countries with a FGM/C/C tradition. The female population from such countries is in fact mainly composed of Egyptian women (79%)⁶.

The meetings were conducted by a female facilitator from Tunisia, president of the Muslim women’s house in Cologno Monzese, selected by Associazione Progetto AISHA (CAIM) since very well known in the target community and in the Egyptian community.

The path was very complex and had some setbacks, mainly due to the difficulties in involving the women of Egyptian origin and in facing the FGM/C issue. In order to facilitate women’s involvement and to raise awareness in the migrant community, three meetings in two mosques in Milan were organized, with the support and the backing of the two Imams: the Mosque in Jenner boulevard and the Mariam Mosque. The meetings contributed to let the issue emerge and to talk about it, even though there were strong resistances from women to face the topic and to publicly declare their aversion to the practice.

The empowerment paths were attended by 10 women on average. Among these, 7 were from Egypt, 1 from Syria, 1 from Morocco and 1 from Tunisia, aged from 28 to 45. 14 sessions of 3 hours each were realised. The meetings took place mainly at the Muslim Women’s House in Cologno Monzese, some were realised at some women participants’ place. Some convivial moments (lunches or teas) were also organized in order to ease the discussion and increase mutual trust, especially in the early stages.

**“FGM/C are our tradition, we cannot change”
Woman from Egypt involved in the paths**

The Egyptian women who participated to the path initially defended the practice, intended as a religious act, a guarantee of purity and chastity, not associating it in any way to a violence or to a deprivation of their own freedom of choice. They also expressed the fear to be excluded from their family and community shall they oppose it.

There was however a gradual change in the perception of the practice, also thanks to the intervention of a Quran teacher and to the support of the Imam. Besides, the participants also showed a great interest in the issue of reproductive health and women’s rights.

⁶ For further information on the population residing in Italy and in the Municipalities of Milan and Rome, please refer to the study produced within the framework of the AFTER project, available at the following link: www.afterwomen.eu/sites/default/files/media/Mapping-and-Gapping-Assessment-Italy.pdf



PATH 2

The second path involved a group of women from Egypt who frequent Casa in Movimento in Cologno Monzese. It was decided to work again with women belonging to this community due to the high number of Egyptian women at risk of FGM/C living in Italy, in Milan in particular, on the one hand, and to test different ways of engagement given the resistances witnessed in the first path, on the other.

Women attending an Italian language course were thus involved in 7 meetings of 2 hours each, coordinated by the female facilitator of the first path, supervised by Progetto AISHA (CAIM) and carried out in collaboration with female gynecologists, experts and workers of Casa in Movimento. The meetings dealt with different issues: women's health, the free health services active in Milan for foreign women, the relationship within the couple and the psycho-physical health of the woman. The FGM/C issue was dealt with in different meetings.

Compared to the first women's group, close attention was paid to sexual pleasure and women's difficulty in experiencing it. During a meeting some women who underwent the practice admitted they feel no pleasure during sexual intercourses, but thought it was their fault. They had never linked FGM/C to the limitation of pleasure. The meetings were held in Italian, providing the translation into Arabic. The Body Mapping, used twice, enabled the group to get acquainted and deal with the issue in a serene and intimate context. Like in the first women's group, it was important to include a Quran teacher, who dealt with the issue from the religious point of view, debunking some beliefs.

At the end of the path, some women asked to keep dealing with the issue and to raise awareness in their community since it still is a taboo and many women fear to face it because they feel judged, especially in their family. Some women kept declaring themselves in favour of the practice, some others instead publicly pronounced themselves against it, a significant step forward thanks to the work done.

“If I was absolutely sure it is a sin, I would not do it...”

Donna proveniente dall'Egitto coinvolta nei percorsi

PATH 3

The third empowerment path involved a group of women from Somalia hosted in the emergency shelter for refugee families Casa Suraya managed by the social cooperative Farsi Prossimo. Thanks to the collaboration with Farsi Prossimo, a first introductory meeting was arranged inside Casa Suraya and the girls and women from Somalia hosted in the structure were thus involved. 8 women aged between 21 and 36 participated to the meetings on a regular basis, some women attended only some meetings and on some dates they did not show up (above all when the meetings were held at the Women's House, a structure they considered “far away”). All the women were victims of FGM/C. The meetings were 17, of 2 hours each. Three meetings were organized at Casa Suraya (the first one, a mid-term meeting and the final one), in summer (May and July 2017) the meetings took place in a park opposite Casa Suraya, the remaining meetings were arranged at the Women's House in Milan. In June the path was interrupted to respect the Ramadan.



The path was facilitated by a female educator from Somalia who works with Cooperativa Crinali, knowledgeable about the topic. All the meetings were held in Somali and several were attended by a female gynaecologist and a female psychotherapist from Cooperativa Crinali, who supervised the advancement of the path and held specific and focused sessions. The first meetings aimed to create a mutual trust relationship among the participants, so the programme included moments of acquaintance and experience sharing, reflections on rights and legal duties in Italy, moments of exchange about the traditions of the various countries.

At the beginning, the Somali women underlined their difficulty in understanding why they had to talk of FGM/C in Italy, which they consider a practice to maintain in order to respect their country's traditions, their origins, and also to keep a relation with their country of origin. Once the group was set, exchange sessions on women's right to health, pregnancy, contraceptives, man/woman relationship, reproductive and sexual health and feminine hygiene were held. Having consolidated a true mutual trust, women faced the FGM/C issue (consequences, tradition, sexual pleasure).

The female facilitator, coming from Somalia but living in Italy for more than 20 years, was key to discuss with the women and to dialogue with the experts (gynaecologist and psychotherapist), enabling the women to debate more sensitive and intimate issues.

The initial diffidence, the low trust in the partners and the facilitator herself, the difficulty in attending the weekly meetings (also due to "laziness" and to the struggle in getting out of the shelter, a safe place) have gradually made room to the pleasantness of the meeting and the exchange, to the added value of being able to talk with experts about intimate problems and to gather in a safe, non judgemental place. Discussing the negative consequences of FGM/C, the freedom to decide about one's own body, the impossibility to recover a sexual pleasure "stolen" by FGM/C, the cohesion of the group and the ability of the facilitator to answer women's questions in a familiar and close way contributed to open sincere dialogue moments on the issue and to change women's perspective, who started to consider the seriousness of the practice.

For the first time, in fact, they had the occasion to talk of the consequences of the genital mutilations on their own life, associating them with some problems experienced in first person, such as not being allowed to deliver at the hospital in Somalia if you have not undergone the practice, not achieving sexual pleasure completely, risking to die after the mutilation.

They had the chance to know everyone's experiences related to issues such as sexuality and FGM/C. It was this interpersonal exchange that let the young women understand for the first time that FGM/C are not made just by Muslim people, but also in other countries of other religions. Some women also asked for information on de-infibulation, on the use of contraceptives and on women's sexual and reproductive rights. At the end of the paths, the participants publicly announced not to be intentioned to practice FGM/C on their daughters.

"You have to know the right rubbing method after the sexual intercourse. The problem is that when I use this contraceptive method, there's the risk that my husband notices it and tells me that I'm trying to make war to his children."

Somali woman answering the gynecologist asking which contraceptive methods they were aware of.



PATH 4

The fourth empowerment path involved a group of young Nigerian women mostly hosted in Casa Suraya, like the Somali women, or in other temporary reception centres (CAS) in Milan and its hinterland. On average 13 young women participated, with a maximum of 24, aged between 18 and 29, mostly victims of FGM/C.

The empowerment path was realised at the Women's House in Milan (24 meetings of 2 hours each, every Tuesday afternoon) and was facilitated by a Nigerian female cultural-linguistic mediator and translator, who collaborates with Cooperativa Crinali and has a long-standing experience in the work with migrant women, also victims of trafficking. For the group of Nigerian women, the Women's House - in a central position in Milan, with a free playground for children - represented a very positive place. The women attended each meeting regularly and passionately. Often, the participants involved other fellow countrywomen.

The main topics faced were: right to health and access to the national health system (free check-ups, reservations and compulsory check-ups, etc...), procedure to require documents in Italy, female body, reproductive health, female genital apparatus, pregnancy, voluntary abortion, female and male contraception, AIDS and sexually transmissible diseases. The main theme was the fight against female genital mutilations and the consequence from a medical and sexual point of view. The theme of the man/woman relationship and of the relation with the family of origin was also dealt with. At the beginning of the path they considered the practice as a tradition not to be questioned, an essential aspect of womanhood in their culture. As the path unfolded, thanks to the exchange with the gynecologist and the psychotherapist from Cooperativa Crinali and to the trust relationship built with the facilitator, it was the young women themselves who conveyed the message of condemnation against FGM/C to the new participants. Some of the pregnant young women at the end of the path declared themselves against the practice and determined not to let their daughters undergo it.

Extremely important was the role of the female gynecologist and psychotherapist, trained at a transcultural clinic, who managed - thanks to the support of the Nigerian female facilitator - to work also on the deconstruction of some social convictions that they tried to investigate and debunk (some examples: mutilated women are more faithful, having a lower sex drive; mutilated women's female genital organ is aesthetically more beautiful than uncut women's one; washing accurately after an unprotected sexual intercourse is enough to avoid getting pregnant).

The designed path represented an excellent occasion to talk about female genital mutilations. Some young women confirmed they found answers to questions they had been asking themselves for a long time, related to the changes experienced in their sexuality after the mutilation. Many asked the gynecologists information about solutions able to redress the surgery undergone.

At the end of the path, a convivial moment was organized and the young women were offered a Nigerian lunch, before which all the participants received an attendance certificate to formalize the trust bond with them and enhance their commitment and motivation.

“Why didn't my mum defend me when the healer told her to make me undergo surgery?” Nigerian young woman involved in the paths



1.1 Results and lessons learned

Overcome initial diffidence

Introducing the FGM/C issue in the paths with women implied difficulties and resistances due to various factors. In the first place, the daily problems of the participants were often linked to primary material needs (house, work, documents, residence permit, refugee status acknowledgement). This made them perceive FGM/C as a secondary issue. In the second place, in all the paths talking about FGM/C initially caused diffidence and shutdown, both because every sexuality-related issue is often considered a taboo and usually not faced in public, and because for many women it was the first time that a practice which is part of their home country's "tradition" was questioned. In addition, the negative consequences of FGM/C often remain unconsidered, on the contrary it is believed they bring along social, hygienical and aesthetical benefits. This is to be added to the participants' general unawareness of FGM/C' risks and consequences on female sexuality and health and to the association of the practice to religious provisions to respect.

For such reasons the empowerment and awareness-raising paths included multiple strategies aimed to establish a trust relationship among the group participants and between the group and the female facilitator, on the one hand, and to address the participants' practical needs, on the other. It was thus decided to include FGM/C within a broader path raising awareness of gender inequalities and of the causes of violence against women and informing about fundamental rights (health, labour, citizenship). In some meetings, professionals (i.e. female gynecologists, sexologists, lawyers) were involved for in-depth analyses about topics and issues the participants were particularly interested in.

The participatory tools used in the path proved powerful and useful to build trust within the group and gradually introduce topics related to body, sexuality and cultural traditions in the circles. They were also effective in facilitating reflection on one's own life and the sharing of experiences. In a few cases, there was resistance to sharing through the tools, especially in participants with higher education levels.

In general, being easy-to-use and based on the drawing and visualisation of the issues under analysis, these tools facilitated the expression of opinions and concepts by each group member, despite the difficulties related to the knowledge of the language within multicultural groups and among the people just arrived in Europe.

"Every woman should have sexual intercourses primarily to experience pleasure"

Woman involved in the empowerment paths

The strategic role of the female facilitators and the presence of external experts

The role of the female facilitators was key for the success of the paths. The charisma, the skills and the education of the linguistic-cultural mediators, of the educators, of the social workers who coordinated and managed the empowerment paths are essential elements to ensure the establishment of a cohesive group, to create a safe and welcoming environment, to let participants' needs emerge and to use an adequate language and approach to face the FGM/C issue.



The issues addressed were manifold and the FGM/C topic was introduced cautiously, letting it be dealt with directly by the participants. The fear was in fact that the young women could have a shutdown and distrust reaction towards the project if they felt judged. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the **role played by the gynecologists and the other experts** who were at the participants' disposal to provide practical answers to the questions asked by the young women on their physical status and their reproductive health. The authoritativeness given by their professional profile and their ability to work with foreign women brought an added value to the path. Besides, the women had the chance to face intimate topics and to get a better knowledge of their body.

In general, the paths led to a change in the involved women's perception of FGM/C. It can be stated that the kind of intervention proposed is thus useful to encourage the participants to ask themselves questions about traditional practices never questioned before, to understand their consequences and the socio-cultural character of their origin, which has no basis in any religion. Among the obstacles that however still remained at the end of the paths, there is the fear to face one's own family and the community, especially in relation with the country of origin. The complementarity of the prevention interventions in Europe and in countries with a FGM/C tradition is thus considered of extreme importance to gradually debunk the social conventions legitimating FGM/C in every part of the world, despite an increasing number of countries have enacted laws condemning FGM/C.

Choice of the place

Women and young women's participation to the empowerment paths was different based on the context and the group. Paths such as that of a SPRAR centre - where women's days are marked by organized and free activities (Italian courses, vocational trainings, internships) and women do not have to provide for their livelihood, but only for their personal and professional educational useful to the integration process - ensured a more regular women's attendance. Moreover, developing the path in the same place where women live allowed not to consume their energies to reach the gathering place, ensuring everyone's punctuality and attendance to all the meetings.

In other cases, such as the involvement of the Somali women in Milan, the main obstacle faced was the logistics of transfers. Just 3 meetings were arranged at Farsi Prossimo's Casa Suraya, because organizing the path outside the centre was considered an added value for all the Somali and Nigerian participants, encouraged to leave the facility and get to know the city better. Casa Suraya provided all the women with tickets for transfers in the city and directions to reach the Women's House (the place chosen for the meetings). Nevertheless, the Somali young women often preferred not to move. In order to facilitate women's participation to the path, some meetings were organized in the park opposite the shelter, as well. While the Nigerian young women always moved and attended regularly all the meetings at their expense, even if organized in a place "far" from Casa Suraya and some of the participants came from outside Milan.

The selection of the **place** where to carry out the paths impacts relatively on their effectiveness, since a lot depends on the group of women involved, and in our opinion, also on the mediation and facilitation capacity of the person managing the empowerment sessions. Of course, being able to organize the path within a shelter facility allows to integrate it within a broader educational and integration context and to provide women with additional tools to facilitate the knowledge of the area and of the services at their disposal.



On the other hand, an “external” place, if safe and reassuring, could have an added value and offer the women opportunities to move and get to know the city where they live.

Carrying out a path with a group of women who already know each other, within a place they cross daily or where they live together, allows to create a more cohesive working group and to build a climate of mutual trust more quickly. These are essential conditions to favour a more free and spontaneous discussion on FGM/C and other private and intimate topics since the very first meetings.

STORIES OF CHANGE

A., a Nigerian young woman aged 24, has been living in Italy for about one year and attended the empowerment path that took place in Rome at the Aida SPRAR centre in Colleferro. At the beginning of the path, she appears annoyed by the definition of FGM/C as a form of violence or a violation of women’s rights.

According to her, it would be worse for a woman not to be circumcised. It is a thousand-year old tradition, quite common and positively judged also from an aesthetic point of view. Moreover, circumcision is a guarantee of purity and virginity for a woman. A woman with a FGM/C is more restrained also in sex drives.

At the end of the path, A. admits these meetings made her reflect and many of the issues emerged made her curious and willing to know more. In her spare time, she made some research on the internet and repeatedly discussed with her mother in Nigeria to fully understand the reasons that led her choose to make such practices on her daughters’ body.

She argues that women need to be more informed since FGM/C are a traditional practice, a consolidated habit that is transferred and practiced as such. Those who still choose it or make it on their daughters’ body nowadays do not know or care much about the risks they are exposing them.

And even if in many States there are strict regulations forbidding such practices, the tradition, in many contexts, especially rural ones, persists stronger than the written law.

She also thinks that the main violation consists in forcing women to undergo the practice without having a choice. Finally, another negative and not secondary consequence she attributes to FGM/C is the privation of the right to experience the same sexual pleasure than men during the sexual intercourse, a denied or reduced pleasure in women who underwent FGM/C.

“This practice must be stopped, because, no matter how traditional, it is harmful, archaic and useless” A.

M., 26 from Somalia, hosted at Casa Suraya, mother of a girl. Shy and always smiling, at the beginning of the project she does not talk much. Sometimes she seems vexed, sometimes - as the other women involved - she wonders why we care so much about talking of FGM/C, what worries us, why they should still be interested in what we (European) consider wrong. During a meeting she states she *“wants to protect her culture and her tradition from external intrusion”* and declares *“I underwent mutilation, all my family did and I do not understand the reason why I should not make my daughter do it”*. During the meetings, and above all thanks to the meetings with the gynecologist



and the psychotherapist, M. opens up, speaks and talks about her experience. She had just delivered, she thought she could not get pregnant, *“because as long as you breastfeed you cannot get pregnant”* and instead she finds out, during a check-up at the hospital, she has been expecting a second child for seven months. She tells her story and she begins to ask questions about contraceptive methods, but those she can use *“secretly. My husband must not know, otherwise he thinks I do not want to have children from him...”*. Thanks to this sharing and the information she gets at every meeting, she understands that sometimes she believed in *“rumours, things that were not true... such as the impossibility of getting pregnant while breastfeeding, or avoiding to get pregnant using coffee...”*, this helps her understand that probably FGM/C, too, are *“rumours, something not to believe in... something you do not have to necessarily do”*. She begins to trust the facilitator, the gynecologist, the other women. She gains confidence towards the group and the facilitator and at the end of the path - during the focus group - she declares: *“Thanks to a different perspective on FGM/C, I changed my mind and no longer intend to make my daughter undergo mutilation”*. M. argues that women in Somalia need more help to face the issue in their family, to find support and also to understand what are the negative consequences caused by FGM/C, but it is Somali women who have to change their mind. This shows, once again, how important the work with the community is.

2. Paths targeting men

| Path no. | Place | Number of meetings | Number of men involved | Age | Origin | Presence in Italy at the time of the path |
|------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|-------|--|--|
| Rome path | CAS in Nerola | 9 | 21 | 18-25 | 1 young man from Burkina Faso, 3 from New Guinea, 5 from Bangladesh, 4 from Nigeria, 1 from Liberia, 3 from Mali-Dogon, 3 from Ivory Coast, 1 from Ghana | some months |
| Milan path | Al Baraka Association - Melegnano | 5 | 8 | 20-50 | Mainly Egypt, then Morocco and Syria | Almost all have been living in Italy for a longer time |



ROME

A men's circle was launched in the province of Rome, within the CAS⁷ managed by the social cooperative Ermes in Nerola.

The path included 9 meetings that took place in 2 months and a half and involved 21 young men aged 18-25 (only 4 were older than 25) and coming from different countries: 1 young man from Burkina Faso, 3 from New Guinea, 5 from Bangladesh, 4 from Nigeria, 1 from Liberia, 3 from Mali-Dogon, 3 from Ivory Coast, 1 from Ghana

When the circle was set up they had all been living in Italy for a few months and a few of them understood Italian. The linguistic difficulties caused communication problems: the young men did not speak a common language. In order to enable everyone to participate and to let them all understand what had been said, each speech needed to be translated in 3 different languages: English, French and Bengali. The time needed for translation made each stage of the discussion considerably longer. This is to be added to the young men's poor general literacy level, and not only with regard to the Italian language, but also to their culture of origin (they have attended school only for a few years. Most of them completed junior high school).

Since the first meeting, the participants have been showing a strong diffidence towards the cooperatives and the associations that manage the facilities hosting migrants in Italy and are part of the fragmented Italian reception system. This made them standoffish in their participation, which made it necessary to increase the number of meetings to create a climate of trust and sharing in order to talk of FGM/C.

The young men attending the empowerment path right off reported the manifold problems they experience in the new migration context: "material" problems (need of documents; wait to be acknowledged the refugee status by the commission; need to learn Italian and find a job), reason why we designed a path facing also other issues beyond FGM/C: gender-based violence and universal rights; health prevention and intergender and intergenerational relations; pleasure and sex drive. Only towards the end of the path the FGM/C issues was dealt with.

"Men should not talk of these things affecting women" Young man involved in the awareness-raising path

FGM/C are a cultural practice the participants felt excluded from. It is a practice usually decided by the women of the family and practiced on the body of the girls. It is a practice that for its intimate character embarrassed the young men, especially the youngest, who did not want to talk about it for this reason. Moreover, being it a female practice, it was also little known to the participants, who tended to justify its justness by adducing inviolable and traditional reasons. Moreover, since the participants were young men just arrived in Italy, they feared to lose their culture of origin, reason why their attachment to the cultural and religious traditions of their country of origin was strong. Related to this was also a form of "respect" towards their mothers and grandmothers, whom they did not want to deceive, and for which they tended to justify FGM/C only through the recourse to an a priori just tradition.

⁷ A CAS is an extraordinary assistance centre where migrants should remain only for the time necessary for the asylum seeker to be transferred to second-line reception facilities.



In addition, during the discussion also “medical, hygienic/sanitary” and “religious” reasons were reported, not backed by any scientific or religious text: beliefs, a priori true as such.

It is patent that among men, much more than among women, FGM/C represent a taboo issue. Those who instead declared to know FGM/C also showed not to be ready to tackle the traditions of their culture of origin. FGM/C are practices that have always been made. Many of the young men’s speeches tell all the women in their family underwent FGM/C (grandmothers, mothers, aunts and sisters).

“I do not know whether FGM/C are a form of violence against women. I know they are an expression of my tradition” A.

“A traditional practice is something that has always been done, there is no reason to change such custom” and this is the first form of justification of the practice. Ibrahim tells that in his country (Mali – Dogon) there is not a shared opinion about FGM/C. *“There are those who believe that, despite the regulations and the awareness-raising campaigns, it is a just practice safeguarding women, their purity and their virginity. There are also some who think it is no longer fair to practice it”*. In his opinion, the cruelest FGM/C forms and the least hygienic ones practiced with rudimentary tools and without anaesthetics in dirty places should be given up in favour of less invasive practices in hospitals. However, the tradition is not questioned as such, but only chosen in a less invasive form.

“It has always been done, yet in Africa children have always been born and born from mutilated women. This is to say that maybe it is in the West that you exaggerate the problem.” A.

Not everyone shares the same opinion. Chuck, for instance, thinks these practices are mainly made in rural areas, reached with more difficulties by the governmental awareness-raising campaigns and where, in his opinion, women and local communities would need more support to understand that infibulation can be given up in favour of less violent and invasive practices. Only few of the young men participating to the debate consider FGM/C an “outdated” or “repealable” practice in any of its forms.

“FGM/C can be overcome. I do not care if a woman is circumcised. She can do that, if it is her choice. There must be no constriction in FGM/C, just as there must be no constriction in the sexual act” C.

MILAN

In Milan it was decided to realise an awareness-raising path targeting mainly men of Egyptian origin. Just as with Egyptian women, involving men was not easy. On the one hand, the fact that the men were not hosted in a reception centre, but had been living in Italy for years made it more difficult to arrange the meetings; on the other hand, a shutdown and diffident attitude was felt, especially towards ActionAid, seen as an external organisation. In order to involve the male Egyptian community in the empowerment path and inform it about the FGM/C issue, two informative meetings were held at the Mariam Mosque in Cascina Gobba. The meetings, taking place in front of the Muslim audience normally frequenting the Mosque during the prayer time, were the occasion to



present the AFTER project goals and the broader issue of gender-based violences. Also thanks to the support from the Imam of the Melegnano Mosque, a group of men of Egyptian origin interested in taking part in the path to better understand the causes and consequences of FGM/C was established. 5 meetings were then held in this Mosque, every Saturday after the prayer. During the meetings, issues such as the couple relationship, gender inequalities, sexuality and female genital mutilations were dealt with. The religious analysis of the issue was key. The facilitator chosen - a man of Egyptian origin and a scholar of Muslim religion - allowed to face the issues also from the religious perspective.

The main goal of the path was to try and distinguish tradition and religion and providing an in-depth overview of female genital mutilations, through the study of the related legislative framework and according to the analysis of the Quran and its precepts.

It was thus decided to organize the meetings at the Mosque with the Imam's assistance, in order to create a trust environment in the group. The FGM/C issue was cautiously introduced and initially focused on the psycho-physical consequences of the practice. The participants thus came to know the different typologies of FGM/C and their consequences on women's lives.

“Everyone has their rights and duties, whether man or woman, and they must be known” Egyptian man involved in the awareness-raising path

During the meetings the Imam of the Melegnano Mosque declared that in the Quran there is no provision about FGM/C. Gradually men became aware of the issue and, based on the information learned, they understood the importance of opposing FGM/C. In this case, the result achieved was closely related to the choice of holding the meetings in a safe environment they trust extremely, such as the Mosque.

The empowerment path was essential to raise men's awareness and the overall result was positive, despite the initial resistances.

“The FGM/C issue was taken to heart by the association of the Imams and religious guides” Imam from a mosque in Milan

2.1 Results and lessons learned

Introducing the FGM/C issue

As in the paths targeting women, men showed initial resistance and diffidence to discuss about FGM/C. Moreover, the additional difficulty for men lied in considering FGM/C as an issue that does not affect them, being it a “female issue” that consequently has to be dealt with by women only.

The path with men, however, highlighted even more how necessary it is to widen the range of the issues faced, in order to question such an intimate and private practice as FGM/C. FGM/C, due to all the meanings they bring along and the reasons justifying them, need to be included within more general and overall analyses. It is also necessary to address the relational dynamics among different genders and generations. In order to face this issue with men, it is essential to support any



discussion about FGM/C also through a more specific exchange about what they cause, also from a medical point of view.

At the same time, a deeper analysis is necessary, also seeking help from Imams and religious leaders, of what is actually prescribed in the sacred texts, in order to overcome the false beliefs considering FGM/C a Quranic provision. Young men's knowledge level of the practice has to be increased to hope for a radical and deep questioning of the practice, starting from debunking the single reasons justifying it.

More narrative meetings are necessary to question traditional practices so rooted in the culture of a people, of a community, of a family, as well as a constant and continuous questioning of some cultural foundations that have never been questioned before.

In order to facilitate dialogue and exchange among the men of the community, we believe it is important to face the issue within courses or meetings focused on relationships and the couple, in an environment known by the participants and with trusted people, religious scholars, Imams, community representatives.

Deconstructing gender stereotypes

The issues of gender equality, freedom of choice, legitimacy of female self-determination and the analysis of what "violence", "pleasure", "sex drive" are, are all key issues for a fruitful analysis and discussion about the FGM/C issue. More meetings would have probably let slowly emerge also other positions more in line with the hoped change. However, we know that the doubts emerged, the quarrels had during the discussions, young men's knowledge taken as true and immutable and questioned by facilitators generated doubts within the participants and weakened certitudes and beliefs always uncritically assumed.

Protected and safe space

It is important to offer protected spaces for discussion and dialogue, guaranteeing anonymity and without publishing pictures or videos of the meetings, especially if the path is short and the trust between the participants and the facilitator is still not strong.

Sexual education and convergence to what the woman desires

Some meetings highlighted the need to face men's sexual education more in depth and raise their awareness about women's sexual pleasure. The request for such follow-up also emerged during a training meeting with the Champions 4 Change⁸ from a group of men from Nigeria, who asked for dialogue and exchange spaces about the issue.

3. Informative meetings

The informative meetings organized in Milan and Rome during the AFTER project had different formats and specific objectives, but all shared the common goal of raising awareness of the project and the consequence of FGM/C on women's lives in the general public, and in particular in the communities from countries with a FGM/C/C tradition.

⁸ For further information about C4C, see: <http://www.afterwomen.eu/our-campaign/italy>



Some events also had the aim to start a dialogue with the local institutions on the interventions needed to prevent the practice and address the needs of women with FGM/C. Some other had the goal to inform the communities on the project activities and involve them in the empowerment and awareness-raising paths.

Such meetings were also an occasion to disseminate informative material, produced within the project framework, about the locally available services specialised in addressing the needs of the women and young women who underwent FGM/C, and the services for women's sexual and reproductive health and about the right to health in general, in a view that is sensitive to cultural differences and to migrant women's specific needs⁹.

Within the framework of the informative meetings, a core activity of the project was the involvement of delegations from countries with a FGM/C/C tradition where ActionAid is present with long-term development programs aimed to prevent and tackle FGM/C¹⁰. Among the innovative aspects of the AFTER project there was in fact the exchange between the migrant communities living in Europe and community delegations from countries with FGM/C/C tradition involved in Testimony Tours to convey messages of change related to the socio-cultural beliefs about FGM/C. It was in fact considered worthwhile to favour the exchange among communities with a FGM/C/C tradition as a more effective means than the exchange between the Western culture and the culture of origin to mitigate stigmatization risks and barriers to dialogue.

The delegations had a variable composition and included local staff from ActionAid's offices in these countries, in particular women experts in women's rights, religious leaders, women activists and former women cutters.

In **Roma** 7 informative meetings were organized.

The **first**, titled *AFTER - From Africa to Europe: fighting female genital mutilations*, was organized at Casa delle Donne Lucha Y Siesta and involved 39 participants.

The event had as its primary objective the presentation of the AFTER project and the reflection on the interventions to prevent and tackle FGM/C in the Rome and Lazio area. The debate highlighted different perspectives through which FGM/C can be read, interpreted and condemned. Among the speakers, Federica Ruggiero, anthropologist and author of "Modificazioni genitali femminili: una questione postcoloniale" (*Female genital modifications: a post-colonial issue*), who framed the FGM/C issue from an anthropological and post-colonialist perspective and also analysed the FGM/C forms existing in the Western world (Vaginal cosmetic surgery - Vagina Design). Enrica Rigo, head of the association Clinica del Diritto, Law professor at Università Roma 3, faced the FGM/C practice from a juridical perspective. Marta Bonafoni, regional advisor of the Lazio Region, presented the actions carried out by the Lazio Region with regard to FGM/C and collected all the considerations emerged during the previous speeches in order to carry out future actions.

The **second** event, *After: fighting gender discriminations and racism. Within and beyond migrant communities*, took place at Scup – Sport cultura popolare and involved 100 participants.

⁹ The information was collected in informative leaflets (factsheets) produced in different languages and widely distributed locally in order to make women coming from countries with a FGM/C tradition aware of the services available. The leaflets are available in the different languages at: www.afterwomen.eu/services-available-your-country

¹⁰ The ActionAid offices involved are based in Liberia, Somaliland, Uganda, Senegal, Tanzania and Kenya. In particular, the meetings in Milan and Rome were attended by delegations from Tanzania and Senegal.



The event was imagined as a moment to involve the migrant communities living in Rome in a day of socialization, information and training, solidarity and exchange. The contents were built starting from the requests from the youth of the CAS in Nerola and their desire to organize a public activity outside the CAS, to better understand their citizenship rights and to know the life experiences of migrants who integrated well in the new immigration context without denying the aspects of their culture of origin.

Along with the youth from the CAS in Nerola, the event was also attended by men and women from the Santa Croce in Gerusalemme squat, migrants close to some successful “business” experiences in the city of Rome and who cross multi-ethnic places, and migrants who participate to some sport activities organized by the Scup gym.

The **third** event was a presentation of the AFTER project at the Santa Croce in Gerusalemme squat, where one of the empowerment paths took place. The event was attended by about 150 people. The committee managing the squat in fact required to present the project activities and goals before the launch of the paths. It was an occasion to distribute the leaflets on the services available in Rome.

The **fourth** meeting was organized for ASL Roma 2 and involved ASL healthcare staff and doctors, the migrant population and citizens from Roma 8 Municipality. The presentation of the different healthcare services available locally and guaranteed by the national service was accompanied by the presentation of the AFTER project and the distribution of the leaflets on the services available. The meeting was attended by about 50 people.

The **fifth** meeting was a presentation of the AFTER project at the squat in Piazza Pecile. The squat hosts about 80 households from different countries of the world. The building was occupied in 2013 by Action Diritti in Movimento. The event took place during the meeting for the building management, usually attended by 50 people, 1 representative per household. The main questions were specifically about the project on FGM/C and on the healthcare services available in Rome.

The **sixth** event was organized in parallel with the Testimony Tour from Tanzania in Rome. The informative initiative at Spin Time theatre in San Giovanni was attended by 100 people. The event “AFTER: freedom of choice and power processes on the female body” allowed to exchange narratives, experiences and methodologies to fight FGM/C between the Testimonies, anti-FGM/C activists, and ActionAid Tanzania women’s right programme staff and the social workers operating in Rome in projects aimed at the integration of the migrant communities, the Champions for Change in Italy, the local politicians and administrators, as well as with women and men from countries where FGM/C are still practiced. The exchange of experiences and narratives allowed the migrant women attending the meeting and currently living in Rome to know how much these practices are contested and fought nowadays also in the countries of the Southern world where they are most widespread. It finally allowed the social cooperative workers and the politicians attending the debate to get a deeper understanding of these traditional practices and of practical methodologies to support the migrant communities living in Italy in the prevention of and opposition to these traditional practices harmful to the female body and dignity.

The **seventh** and final event titled “AFTER: fighting discriminations, gender-based violence and racism” was organized at Casa delle Donne Lucha y Siesta at the conclusion of the AFTER project. This initiative not only represented a final moment of public feedback about the AFTER project, but also an occasion for free and open discussion among representatives of politics, third sector



associations and culture, about the tools and practices implemented and implementable in the future to tackle any form of violence against women.

In addition to these dissemination and information meetings targeting not only the migrant communities living in the municipality of Rome but also all the interested citizens, social workers and political representatives sensitive to key issues of the contemporary debate - such as the integration of the migrant communities, the safeguard of women's rights and the contrast to any form of gender-based violence - 4 specific working tables were organized about such issues with the political representatives of the Lazio Region along with 3 meetings at the Department for social policies of the Municipality of Rome with the representatives of the Roxane project, specifically aimed at the support and protection of the women survivors of violence and trafficking.

Informative stands about the AFTER project, where the project factsheets and leaflets were distributed, were also set up at the Altra Estate celebration in Garbatella, organized by the cultural association Casetta Rossa from 6 to 17 July 2017, during the cultural events organized by Lucha y Siesta at their women's house, and in some of the main squats in the municipality of Rome.

Just as many informative meetings and local events were organized in **Milan**. In addition, delegations of the AFTER project attended meetings organized by other associations or local bodies, presenting the project. For instance, a delegation of the project participated with an informative stand at the national event "Donne dimenticate" (*forgotten women*), organized by Progetto AISHA to analyse the issue of gender-based violence. During the day, the factsheets in Italian, French and Arabic were distributed and information about the project provided. The meeting was attended by about 100 people.

The factsheets were also distributed during the event "Biciclettiamo", organized by Progetto AISHA to promote women's rights. The event was attended by about 300 people (by bike) and the "dandelions" symbolizing the AFTER project campaign were also distributed. Informative material was distributed also during a RUN4UNITY marathon, organized in Cologno Monzese. In the two years of the project, 3 hearings at the Lombardy Region and the Municipality of Milan and 4 meetings with regional and municipal institutional representatives took place. Finally, during the Testimony Tours (July and October 2017), when delegations from Tanzania and Senegal came to Milan, public presentations of the project were organized, such as the event "From Africa to Europe to fight female genital mutilations", organized at Milan's Women's House on 11 July 2017 and attended by over 50 people. Thanks to the network established in the city and to the constant support from the associations involved and the interest shown by the political stakeholders, other 3 awareness-raising and follow-up meetings are already scheduled for 2018.

Here below, the events organized only and exclusively for the communities involved in the empowerment paths (Nigerian, Somali and Egyptian).

The first event organized in Milan was the meeting with the **Nigerian community**, held on Sunday, 9 July 2017 during the weekly assembly of the Nigerian Union. During the meeting, attended by about 40 Nigerian women and men living in Italy for a long time, the AFTER project was presented by the female facilitator of the empowerment path targeting the Nigerian young women, followed by the testimony of the representatives from Tanzania. The meeting was extremely fruitful and interesting and the Nigerian community declared its willingness to face the issue. A delegation of the Nigerian Union had also attended a meeting, held at ActionAid in June 2017, dedicated to the Champions 4 Change (a group of volunteers, experts or representatives of the communities involved in the



project). It is worth mentioning that during the meeting, the Nigerian men expressed their willingness and interest in participating to empowerment paths on the issue and on women's sexual and reproductive rights.

The AFTER project was presented also on an evening dedicated to the **Somali traditions and culture**, attended also by the young women involved in the empowerment path. The meeting, organized by the Somali association Shukran, was attended by about 50 people. It was an occasion to present the AFTER project to the Somali community and to distribute the informative material.

During the October 2017 Testimony Tour that hosted three Senegalese focal people (a representative from ActionAid Senegal active on projects defending women's rights; a former cutter and an Imam fighting to stop FGM/C), a meeting between the **Muslim male community** in Melegnano and the Senegalese Imam was organized at the Melegnano mosque.

The meeting was an important exchange occasion on the issue of violence against women and female genital mutilations, dealt with through an analysis of the Muslim religious precepts. Organizing such meeting inside the Mosque allowed to reach the Muslim male community of the men's forum, which represents the most difficult group to involve in the empowerment paths.

The main message conveyed during these informative meetings was the separation of the identification of FGM/C with the religious duty. The Imams expressed the importance of remaining united as a community, to open up to dialogue and awareness-raising, despite there are different interpretations of the Muslim precepts.

Always during the October Testimony Tour, for the first time in Milan, a **public event inside a Mosque on the FGM/C issue** was organized. The meeting was aimed at the understanding of the FGM/C issue through the analysis of the Quran precepts and included the vision of some documentaries produced under the project. The event was attended by about 20 people, half of whom from Egypt. This meeting certainly represented an important moment of exchange about the FGM/C issue.

4. Conclusions

The FGM/C prevention interventions in Italy and in the rest of Europe cannot but **include communities**, in programme design as well as implementation. The choice of working with women and men from countries with a FGM/C/C tradition under the AFTER project allowed to highlight criticalities and also opportunities that can inform future projects and interventions.

Women and men's participation to the empowerment and awareness-raising paths represented a first obstacle to their implementation. Since the activity did not have an economic return or provide a certification useful for professional or training purposes, initially women and men did not perceive the time spent in the project activities as useful. Such difficulty was particularly significant for those who had several daily commitments, such as work, care work, housework, etc.

This was accompanied by the **initial reticence** to talk of an issue that usually communities hardly face in public, being it a taboo to talk of sexuality and sexual and reproductive rights, least of all in a Western context that might be perceived as judging and stigmatizing towards other cultures.



The participatory methodologies used thus contributed to create a climate of trust and open exchange of stories, opinions and information. The young women soon gave up their diffidence and, though timidly in relation to sexuality, opened up to dialogue.

The difficulty to participate was lower in contexts such as the CAS or SPRAR centres, where the migrants just arrived in Italy or waiting for the acknowledgement of the refugee status live. Here the time is marked by internships, Italian courses, vocational training courses, all beneficial to the integration process. The empowerment path, too, is thus seized as a further opportunity to get to know new cultures and the one of the hosting country, European and Western, which guarantees a constant attendance during the various sessions. All the paths thus included also the **exchange** among participants not only about FGM/C but **also on other topics** and issues relevant to the women involved: other forms of violence against women common to every geographical contexts and other expressions of gender inequalities, i.e. at work. **Health**, in general, and women's sexual and reproductive rights, sexual pleasure and freedom of choice on one's own body, as well as contraception, voluntary abortion and relevant local services were also discussed. Precisely due to their condition of migrants or foreigners in Italy, the women and men involved in the paths expressed in fact the need to get information to address what they perceived as the most immediate needs with regard to FGM/C.

The participation difficulties were partly addressed facing topics broader than FGM/C and relevant to the integration process of the women and men involved. Despite their differences in culture, walk of life and national origin, the participants showed the interest and the need to get practical information on the right to health and its accessibility, on their civil rights and on rights in general.

“How can circumcision on a girl be a violence? I do not see violence in this, it is a tradition” Woman involved in the empowerment paths

The starting point of the project was in fact the choice to **have the groups facilitated by female linguistic-cultural mediators or, however, by men and women coming from countries with a FGM/C/C tradition**. This choice was driven by the need to ensure a non-judgmental approach respectful of the women and the men, since FGM/C, as other traditional practices, can easily create risks of stigmatization and undermine the trust of the participants towards the project.

As shown in the report, this choice has not always been sufficient to favour dialogue about FGM/C and the expected results were not achieved in all the cases. Such difficulties highlighted the need for **continual interventions in time** gradually facing the causes of FGM/C in a dialogue with the communities aimed at deconstructing them.

The **responsibility of children care** is another aspect to consider to favour participation, especially women's. During some paths in Rome the women participated with their sons and daughters, in some cases babies. This forced Lucha y Siesta's facilitators to look after them in rotation, not to distract the mothers. It would have been useful to find a different place and specific human resources able to contain and distract the children.

Many paths were attended by women and men from various countries, not all with a FGM/C/C tradition. Other paths involved homogeneous groups instead. In both cases, this led to positive results for the discussion about FGM/C: diversity often enriched the debate. In their narratives, elements of personal life, but also specific traditions and cultures, mix. Even among women from the



same countries there are often differences in the traditions and/or customs told. Differences are often found also in the regulations imposing men and women different rights and duties. In other cases, it was precisely the group homogeneity in terms of origin and similar migratory paths that contributed to the group cohesion and to the trust building, essential for sharing.

The typology of the intervention proposed is thus useful to encourage participants to ask themselves questions about traditional practices never questioned before, to understand their consequences and the socio-cultural character of their origin, which has no basis in any religion.

Among the obstacles still persisting at the end of the paths, there was however the fear to face one's own family and the community, in particular in relation to the country of origin. The complementarity of the prevention interventions in Europe and in countries with a FGM/C tradition is thus considered of extreme importance, to gradually debunk the social conventions legitimating FGM/C in every part of the world, despite an increasing number of countries have enacted laws condemning FGM/C.

"FGM/C can be overcome. I do not care if a woman is circumcised. She can do that, if it is her choice. There must be no restriction in FGM/C, just as there must be no restriction in the sexual act" Man involved in the paths.

The prevention strategies must be integrated into broader strategies fighting violence against women, acknowledging that no country is exempt from the problem, regardless of the form it takes depending on the context. Such approach favours reflection on the issue of violence, without stigmatizing the communities with a FGM/C/C tradition, encouraging an intercultural dialogue that faces the root causes of gender-based violence. In parallel, interventions aimed at information about women's sexual and reproductive rights targeting women and men, boys and girls, must be ensured, being beneficial to a better understanding of the consequences of FGM/C on women and men's sexuality.